Whadǫǫ Tehmį
Long-Ago People's Packsack

Dene Babiche Bags: Tradition and Revival

Suzan Marie
Judy Thompson

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Photo Left: Jeannie Shae, Fort Good Hope, with babiche bag decorated with porcupine quillwork she made in July 2000. Photograph by Suzan Marie. *Photo Right:* Participants at the first babiche bag workshop, held in Wha Ti, November 23–27, 1998. Left to right, back row: Madeline Champlain, Liza Jeremickca, Mary Adele Beaverho, Dora Alexis, Louisa Beaverho, Georgina Simpson, Albert Nitsiza. Front row: Mary Adele Simpson, Liza Nitsiza, Elizabeth Mantla, Marie Madeline Nitsiza, Rosa Romie. Photograph by Suzan Marie. *Hunting bag*, c. 1870. ©Canadian Museum of Civilization CMC VI-Z-64. Photograph and concept by Harry Foster.

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Bag made by Lucy Ann Yakeleya 2002. Private collection. Photograph by Harry Foster.

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Abstract

Net bags made from caribou thong — today known as "babiche bags" — were once commonplace items in a Dene home. People used them particularly for carrying provisions for a hunting trip, and for packing freshly killed game. Although intended for everyday, practical use, babiche bags were often beautifully decorated with porcupine quillwork, fringes and coloured patterns in the netting.

Babiche bags were used by the Dene until the early twentieth century. Gradually, however, as imported materials such as canvas and ready-made bags and packsacks became more available, the Dene ceased to make the traditional homemade bag. By the end of the twentieth century, only a few among the oldest generation of Dene knew how to make babiche bags, or even recalled them being part of their culture.

In 1998, Suzan Marie — a Chipewyan Dene with a deep interest in the traditional arts of her people — initiated a project to revive this almost-forgotten craft. With the assistance of elder-instructors she held babiche bag workshops in several small Dene communities. The Canadian Museum of Civilization participated by supplying the workshops with the results of research on museum collections, and photographs of museum examples. As a result of the workshops and the interest they generated within Dene communities, babiche bags are being made once again by Dene artisans.

This book tells of the role babiche bags played in Dene lives during an earlier time, and of the modern revival of this traditional craft. It is richly illustrated with photographs of babiche bags, both old and new. Also included are descriptions and illustrations of the techniques involved in making a babiche bag. This book will be a resource to anyone interested in Dene culture and heritage. It will also serve as a practical guide to artisans wishing to make their own Dene babiche bag.

Résumé

Les sacs de filet en lanières de caribou – aujourd'hui connus sous le nom de « sacs en babiche » – étaient autrefois des objets usuels chez les Dénés. Ils étaient utilisés surtout pour le transport des provisions lors des expéditions de chasse, ainsi que pour l'emballage du gibier fraîchement abattu. Ces sacs avaient une fonction pratique au quotidien, mais souvent, ils étaient ornés de piquants de porc-épic et de franges, et le filet était décoré de motifs colorés.

Les Dénés ont utilisé des sacs en babiche jusqu'au début du XX^{e} siècle. Toutefois, à mesure qu'ils ont eu accès à des matériaux importés, comme la toile, les sacs prêts à l'usage et les sacs à dos, ils ont cessé de fabriquer à la main des sacs traditionnels. À la fin du XX^{e} siècle, seuls quelques Dénés parmi les plus anciens savaient confectionner des sacs en babiche ou se rappelaient même que ces objets faisaient partie de leur culture.

En 1998, Suzan Marie – une Dénée chipewyane passionnée des arts traditionnels de son peuple – lançait un projet visant à faire revivre cet art presque tombé dans l'oubli. Guidée par des aînées, elle a mis sur pied des ateliers de confection de sacs en babiche dans plusieurs petites communautés dénées. Le Musée canadien des civilisations a participé au projet en contribuant aux ateliers les résultats de recherches sur les collections du Musée ainsi que des photographies d'exemples. Grâce à ces ateliers et à l'intérêt qu'ils ont suscité dans les communautés dénées, les artisans dénés confectionnent encore aujourd'hui des sacs en babiche.

Ce livre raconte le rôle autrefois joué par les sacs en babiche dans la vie des Dénés ainsi que le renouveau moderne de cet art traditionnel. Il est merveilleusement bien illustré de photographies de sacs en babiche, anciens et récents. On y retrouve également des descriptions et des illustrations des techniques de fabrication. Cet ouvrage sera une ressource importante pour quiconque s'intéresse à la culture et au patrimoine des Dénés. Il constituera aussi un guide pratique pour les artisans qui veulent fabriquer un sac en babiche dené.

Table of Contents

Introduction 1

Section I: The Dene Babiche Bag Tradition 9

Section II: Revival of the Tradition 25

Section III: Making a Babiche Bag 37

- Preparation of Babiche 38
- Making a Frame 39
- Starting the Bag 40
- Netting Technique 41

Acknowledgements 43

Endnotes 47

With this book I would like to honour the Dene of yesterday, who gave us our unique heritage; recognize the Dene artisans of today, who are keeping traditional skills alive; and encourage the Dene youth of tomorrow, who will keep our culture strong.
(Suzan Marie, October 2003)

Back in the olden days, the main thing was caribou, we lived on caribou and fish. From the caribou hide, we could make so many things.
(Dora Nitsiza, June 2003)

Introduction

It wasn't until late in the eighteenth century that European explorers and fur-traders penetrated the region known today as Canada's Northwest Territories. There, they encountered an independent and self-reliant people who had occupied the land for centuries. In their own, Athabaskan, languages, these people referred to themselves as "Dene".[1]

The Dene were semi-nomadic hunters and fishers. They lived in small family groups and spent much of the year traveling, covering great distances as they moved between autumn and spring hunting grounds and summer fishing sites. Most travel was on foot, with belongings packed on people's backs or, in winter, dragged on wooden or hide toboggans.

Two large game species — moose and caribou — were particularly important to the Dene. These animals were a major food source, and they also provided materials — hides, sinews, bones and antlers — from which the Dene could make clothing, lodges, tools and weapons, as well as many other useful and important items.

This book concerns one such useful and important item: a strong, lightweight and durable bag made from netted caribou thong (Figure 1). In former times, the Dene used this type of bag to carry provisions for a hunting trip, and for packing freshly killed game. When camp was moved, net bags also were used to transport clothing and other personal possessions. A carrying strap or "tump line" — usually, a broad band of tanned caribou or moose hide — allowed the bag to be carried on the back (with the strap passing over the forehead or shoulders), or under an arm (with the strap over the opposite shoulder and crossing the chest diagonally). Stuffed to capacity, a net bag was substantially larger than its original size (the netting had considerable "give" to it), but when not required, it could be folded into a small, flat rectangle which took up very little space and weighed next to nothing. In short, these simple yet distinctive bags were admirably

suited to the needs of a nomadic hunting people, and were once commonplace items in Dene homes.

Long ago, each Dene group would have had a word, or words, in their own language to designate a bag made from netted thong. For example, a Sahtu Dene elder recently recalled a word, "dahtl'Q", which in earlier times was used in reference to such bags: "dah" meant "above, off the ground", and "tl'Q" meant "woven, braided, knitted, tied, or laced".[2] In the nineteenth century, in the jargon of the fur trade, the Dene net

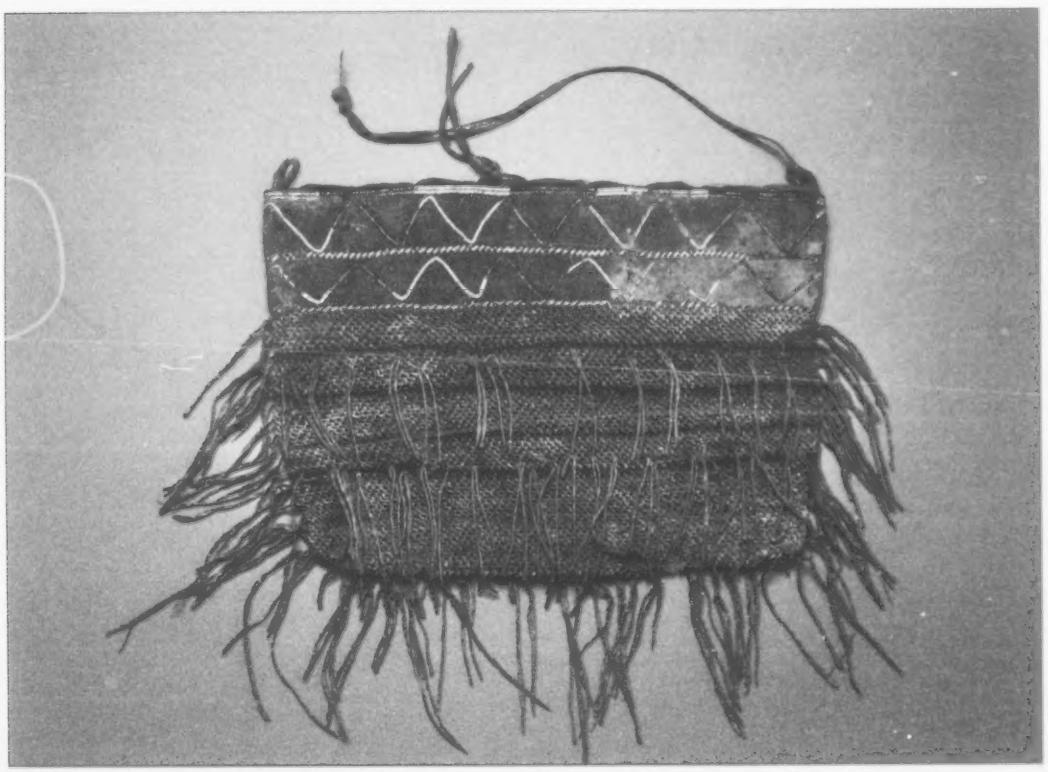

Figure 1

Fish Bag. Group and age unknown. Collected by Walter Gouin, 1875–1890. Width: 28 cm (11 in.); Height: 19.5 cm (8 in.). ©Canadian Museum of Civilization/CMC VI-Z-58. Photograph by Harry Foster

This bag is made and decorated entirely from indigenous materials: tanned caribou hide, rawhide thong, porcupine quills and sinew. It was collected from the "Mackenzie River" Dene sometime between 1875 and 1890, and was said by the collector to be a "fish bag" and "over 100" years old when he acquired it. The bag does not show extensive use, however, and may not be much older than its collection date.

bag became known as a "babiche bag". The word "babiche" apparently originated with Algonquian-speaking people in eastern Canada. As early as the seventeenth century, it was used by fur trade personnel to describe the fine rawhide thong used in making snowshoes and other items.[3] As the trade expanded to the northwest, the word "babiche" travelled with it. Today, the term "babiche bag" is used in reference to netted bags made of line cut from a tanned hide, as well as to those made from "true" babiche — that is, from rawhide thong.

The arrival of European explorers and fur traders in Dene territory, and the establishment of permanent trading posts in the region, resulted in many changes to traditional Dene societies and culture during the nineteenth century. Changes to the material culture were most obvious. Some traditional crafts — for example,

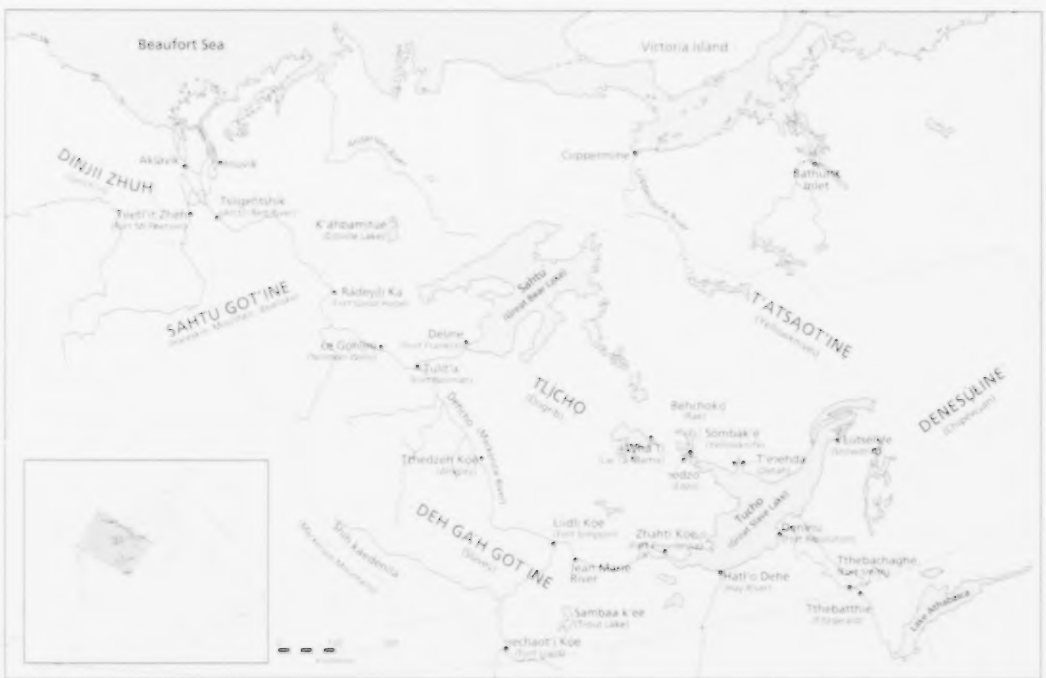

Figure 2
Map showing Northwest Territories' Dene and Gwich'in groups and communities.

spruce root basketry — died out rather rapidly as imported substitutes (metal kettles) became available.[4] European technology offered no good alternative to the traditional net bag made from caribou thong, however, and these bags continued to be made and used by the Dene for many decades after European contact.

Although babiche bags were made for everyday, utilitarian purposes, they were often beautifully decorated. Usually, designs in coloured porcupine quills were worked on the band of tanned hide that formed the top of the bag. In the netting, patterns were formed through a variation of the looping technique, and through use of thongs which had been coloured red and black. Tassels of quill-wrapped thongs and tufts of animal hair were attached in rows to the netted portion.

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many visitors to the North — serious collectors as well as early tourists — acquired babiche bags. Lightweight, portable, well crafted, and distinctively Dene, the bags made ideal souvenirs of a Northern adventure. Many ended up in museums in Canada, the United States, and Europe. A number of these museum collections were surveyed and studied during the research for this project. The examples used to illustrate this publication are drawn, however, from two of the more important collections: those of the National Museums of Scotland and of the Canadian Museum of Civilization. The National Museums of Scotland collection includes eight of the earliest known examples of Dene babiche bags, collected in 1859 and 1860. The Canadian Museum of Civilization collection consists of eighteen examples, collected over a 70-year period, from about 1870 up until the late 1930s.

Babiche bags continued to play a role in Dene culture into the early decades of the twentieth century. Gradually, however, as lifestyles and economies changed, and as imported materials such as canvas and ready-made bags and packsacks became more available to the Dene, the traditional homemade bag was made less and less. By the 1930s, few young Dene women were being taught how to make babiche bags. By the end of the twentieth century, only a few among the oldest generation of Dene knew how to make them — or even recalled a time when such bags were used by their people.

While studying at university in the 1990s, Suzan Marie — a Chipewyan Dene with a deep interest in the traditional arts of her people — saw published photographs of some of the babiche bags held in museum collections. Around the same time, she received an extraordinary gift: a friend gave her a babiche bag said to be Dogrib in origin and over a hundred years old (Figure 3). Intrigued, she sought to learn more about bags of this type, only to discover that they were almost forgotten by the Dene. She realized that, with the passing of the older generation, memories of this aspect of Dene culture would be gone forever. She began looking for ways in which knowledge of this tradition might be preserved, and the related skills revitalized and passed on to younger generations. The result was a series of workshops, held in small Dene communities, during which Dene participants learned how to make and decorate babiche bags.

Figure 3

Suzan Marie with a babiche bag which was said to be one hundred years old, given to her by a friend.
Photograph by Harry Foster.

I always had a desire to know my culture because I was brought up in residential schools, in foster homes and receiving homes, from a really young age — seven years old. I never had my grandmas, my grandpas, or my mum or aunties, or anyone to show me. We never were exposed to that in any of these institutions . . . when I was going to university I saw some of it in books . . . and then I had an opportunity to live in Fort Good Hope. I learned so much there from Mary Barnaby, Janet Grandjambe, Judy Lafferty, Denise Manuel and Phoebe McNeely. Once I met them, I just kept learning. During the three and a half years I was there I went on the land and I travelled all over . . . . They were all very patient at teaching me how to do things properly. I knew I was learning from master seamstresses and tanners, who practiced their traditional way of life.
(Suzan Marie, June 2003)

For a number of reasons, the Dogrib region seemed a logical place to start the process of re-introducing the craft. The Dogrib hunted caribou and tanned the hides; thus, there would be little difficulty in obtaining this basic material. There were also elders in Dogrib communities who remembered, and were willing to teach, the techniques involved in making a babiche bag. Suzan Marie felt a special, personal, connection to one Dogrib community in particular. Her oldest brother, Dennis, had been adopted by a former chief of Wha Ti named Louis Beaulieu, and his wife, Elise. The first workshop on babiche bag construction was thus held in Wha Ti in 1998. Over the next three years, several more workshops followed, held in other Dene communities.

> Research and study of museum collections were important to this project. No one was making these bags anymore. By seeing and studying the bags in collections, we learned so much about what our ancestors were doing a long time ago. We continually were awed by their intelligence and their ingenuity — with so little, they accomplished so much. They didn't make many things, but what they made was perfectly tuned to their needs and their environment.
> *(Suzan Marie, June 2003)*

Museum collections — which document the forms, techniques and artistic traditions of earlier times — were important to this revival project. The Canadian Museum of Civilization supplied the workshops with photographs (including details of construction and decoration) of museum examples, for consultation by the participants. A more hands-on opportunity for study of museum collections by Dene individuals — and an important stage in the consultation and research behind the writing of this book — was a visit, in June 2003, by a group of Dene to the Canadian Museum of Civilization. The group consisted of three persons from the Dogrib community of Wha Ti (elder Dora Nitsiza, Sub-Chief and interpreter Albert Nitsiza, and community member Bernice Beaverho); Lucy Ann Yakeleya, a Sahtu Dene linguist and craftsperson; and Suzan Marie, coordinator of the project (Figure 4). Over three days, we looked at Dene babiche bags from the Museum's collection, and recorded knowledge and memories related to the use of such bags in the past. Dora Nitsiza, Lucy Ann Yakeleya and Suzan Marie demonstrated some of the techniques involved in making and decorating a bag. Photographs taken at this time by Harry Foster, the Museum's photographer, form the basis of the "how-to" section of this book.

As a result of the workshops, and the interest they generated within Dene communities, babiche bags are being made once again by Dene artisans. As the examples shown here attest, the workmanship and artistry on many recently made examples are of a very high quality. Some of these bags are marketed as collector's items; some are being acquired by museums. Others are sold or gifted within Dene communities, or kept for personal use. Modern-day Dene are finding new uses for this heritage item: for example, a small version of the babiche bag is today gaining popularity as a carrier for bingo "dabbers"!

> Today, as a result of the workshops, some artisans are re-creating the same size of bags that they have seen in the museum pictures — the ones that were made a long time ago. And they are also making smaller bags, in more contemporary styles, to use as purses.
> (*Suzan Marie, June 2003*)

Figure 4

Looking at Dogrib collections at the Canadian Museum of Civilization, June 16, 2003. Left to right: Lucy Ann Yakeleya, Sahtu Dene linguist and craft worker; Dora Nitsiza, Dogrib elder, Wha Ti First Nation; Bernice Beaverho, Wha Ti First Nation; Judy Thompson, CMC; Albert Nitsiza, Sub-Chief and interpreter, Wha Ti First Nation; Suzan Marie, project coordinator and owner of BushTea Resources, Yellowknife. Photograph by Steven Darby.

Many people — in museums, in government departments and particularly in Dene communities — have contributed to the project to revive the art of the Dene babiche bag. Their names are listed in the Acknowledgements at the back of this book. Suzan Marie and I owe a special debt of gratitude to the elders who generously shared with us their knowledge and memories of this aspect of Dene culture and history — either through instructing at the workshops, or through interviews conducted during the research for this book. The contribution made by these elders has been critical both to the revitalization project and to this publication. A heartfelt "mahsi cho", therefore, to Caroline Bonnetrouge, Sarah Hardisty, Jane Grossetete, Elizabeth Mantla, Dora Nitsiza, and Mary Madeline Nitsiza.

Judy Thompson
Canadian Museum of Civilization
October 2003

Section I

The Dene Babiche Bag Tradition

Owindia, a Slavey girl, at about five years of age. From Charlotte S. Bompas, *Owindia: A True Tale of the Mackenzie River Indians*. London: Wells Gardner, Darton & Co., 1886.

A description of an ancient rite, recorded almost a century and a half ago, suggests that netted bags have been part of Dene culture for a long time. Around 1860, Father Emile Petitot — a missionary who was a keen observer of Dene culture and language — wrote down a Dene description of a ceremony intended to ensure "a good supply of meat". Netted bags — in this case described as "mesh pouches" — played a role in this ritual. His account began:

> *When the snow thaws and the moon is on the wane, at nightfall meat is chopped up very finely and put in mesh pouches, then the procession begins, with the meat being carried on the backs of those participating.*
>
> *The line winds around the tents and eventually enters a tent.*
>
> *The procession circles the tent, meat is eaten by everyone, then the procession leaves again and enters another home and so on, in and out of many homes without stopping . . .* [5]

In the memories of elders today, and as recorded by ethnographers in the early twentieth century, babiche bags were part of the everyday equipment of a Dene household.[6] A man going hunting would take a babiche bag with him, to carry provisions for the trail, or freshly killed small game such as rabbits, ducks or fish. Women used these bags as well. Dogrib elder Dora Nitsiza recalls her grandmother taking a babiche bag when she went to check her rabbit snares, or when she checked her fishing net.[7] The bags were well designed for this purpose. They were lightweight and strong, with an open mesh that allowed air to circulate so that the game would not spoil. In winter, snow could fall through. A hunter protected his clothes from blood or other soiling from freshly killed game by inserting a liner of birch bark into the bag, against the side nearest his body. According to Dora Nitsiza, leafy willow branches also were used for this purpose:

> *My grandmother said they used willow branches with lots of leaves in the babiche bag. You put the branches in the bottom, then you can put your fish in there or whatever you catch. The blood will stay on the leaves, not drip through.*[8]

If a babiche bag did get stained with blood, it was rinsed in cold water to clean it.[9]

Depending on its size, and the weight of its load, the bag was carried either on the back, supported by a strap (sometimes called a "tump line") which passed over the chest and shoulders or across the forehead, or under one arm, with the strap over the opposite shoulder and crossing the chest diagonally.

In the dry air of summer, babiche could become brittle and break. People were careful not to leave their netted bags hanging outside at this time of year. They brought them inside the lodge or house and stored them under spruce branches, which kept the bags damp.[10]

> When the men went hunting, they would take these babiche bags with them. They tried to make it strong because they might bring some meat back in it. Sometimes they made it bigger so they could put all their gear in there and stay out in the bush.
> (Dora Nitsiza, June 2003)

The oldest museum examples of Dene netted bags date to the third quarter of the nineteenth century. Between 1859 and 1862, Hudson's Bay Company traders, stationed at posts in Dene territory, sent eight examples of babiche bags to what was then a new institution: the Industrial Museum of Scotland (later, the Royal Scottish Museum and, later still, the National Museums of Scotland), located in Edinburgh.[11] Seven of the bags were attributed to Slavey, Dogrib, and Hare (Figures 6, 7 and 8); for the eighth, collected in Fort Chipewyan, no culture of origin was given. Several examples in the Canadian Museum of Civilization are comparable in age to these National Museums of Scotland bags, although their culture of origin is less well documented (Figures 1, 9, 10 and 11).

These mid-nineteenth-century babiche bags are alike in many respects. Each is oblong in shape, wider than it is deep, and open at the top. Sizes vary, but bags approximately 50 cm (20 in.) wide by about 25 cm (10 in.) deep are most common.

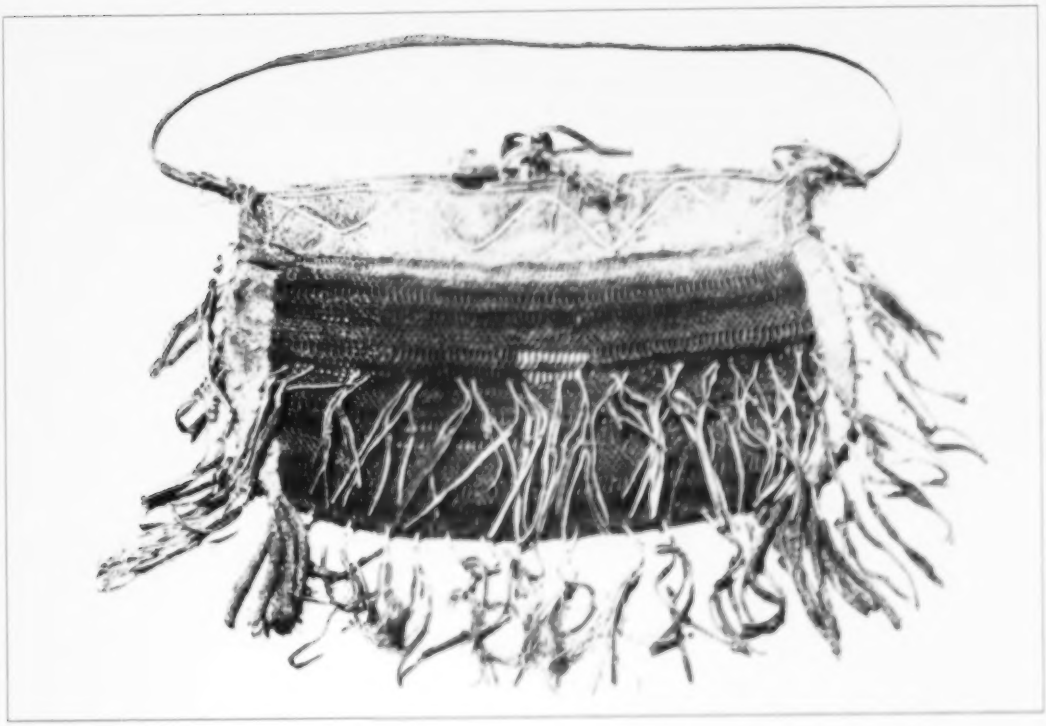

Figure 6

Hunting Bag. Dogrib. Collected by Bernard Ross, Fort Rae, 1859. 23 cm (9 in.) x 15.5 cm (6 in.).
©The Trustees of the National Museums of Scotland/NMS 481.8.

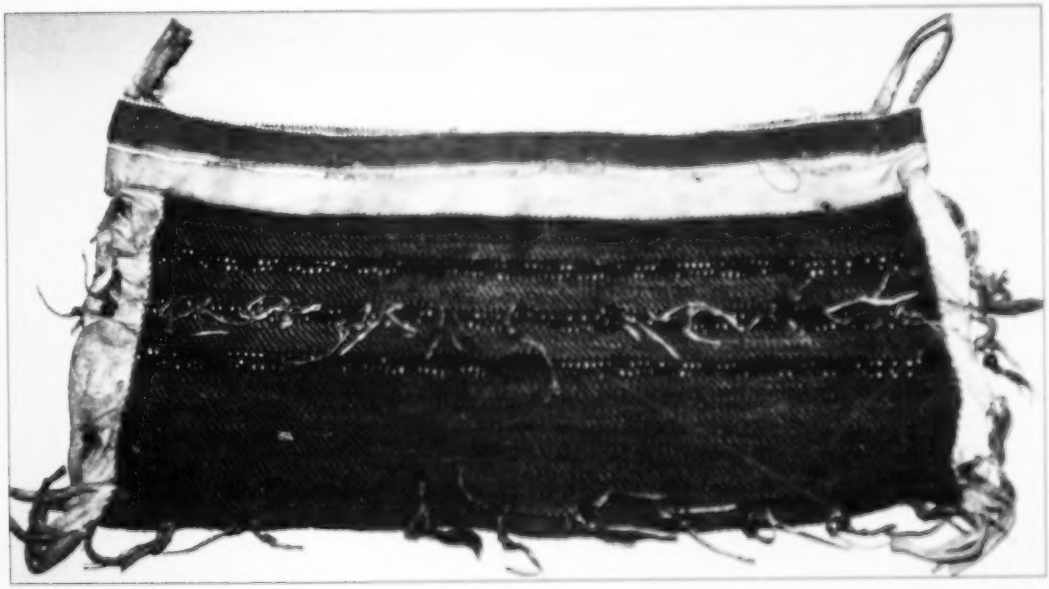

Figure 7

Work Bag. Slavey. Collected by Bernard Ross, Fort Simpson, 1860. 46 cm (18 in.) x 23.5 cm (9.25 in.).
©The Trustees of the National Museums of Scotland/NMS 538.47.

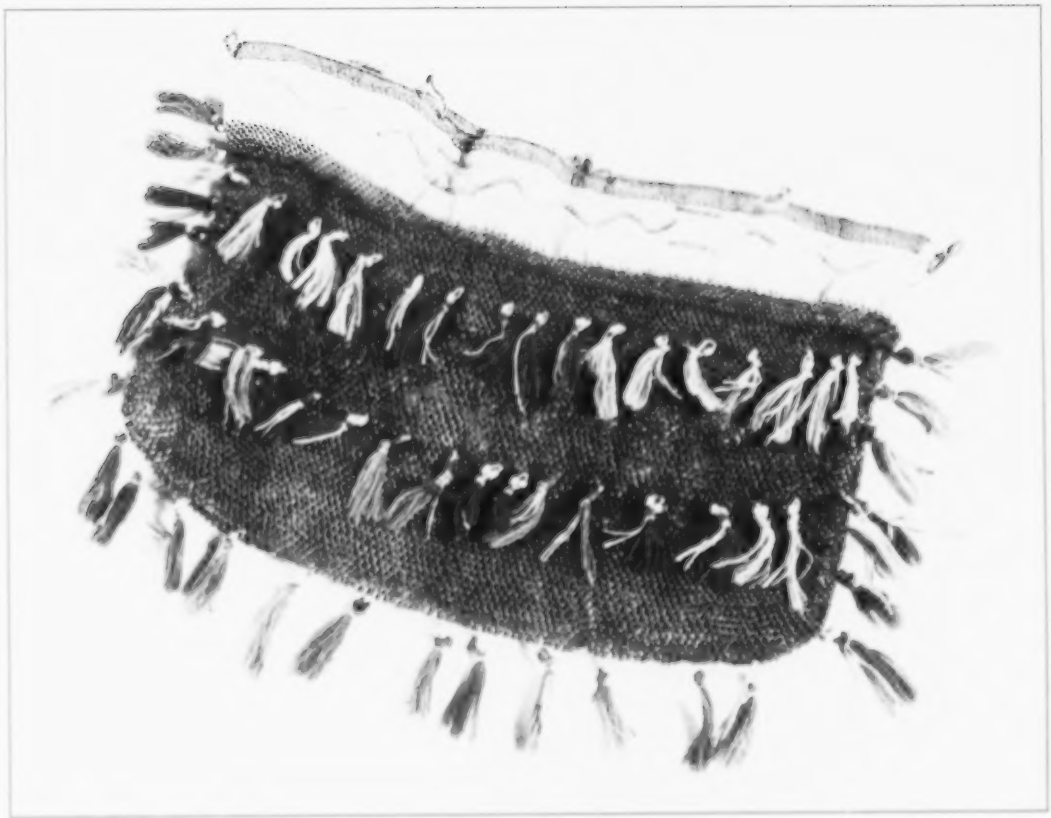

Figure 8

Hunting Bag. Hare. Collected by Robert MacFarlane, Fort Simpson, 1860. 53.5 cm (21 in.) x 34.5 cm (13.5 in.). ©The Trustees of the National Museums of Scotland/NMS 559.22.

In each case, the top of the bag is formed from a broad band of tanned caribou or moose hide. On some examples, narrower pieces of the same hide also are used to make sides on the bag. The remainder of the bag is netted in a simple looping technique, using very fine babiche (Figure 12). A few bags are made from thong cut from a tanned caribou hide (rather than from rawhide), and on one bag, sinew is used for the netting instead of thong (Figure 9).

Loops for the attachment of a carrying strap are sewn at either top corner of each bag. The loop often is simply formed from a short, doubled length of hide. On some bags, the loops are smaller and firmer, each made from a length of babiche wrapped with the same material, shaped into a curve, and sewn to the bag with sinew thread. Similarly wrapped babiche loops are, in some cases, sewn at regular intervals along the top of the bag: a thong laced back and forth

Figure 9

Netted Bag. Group unknown. Collected by Edward Harris, circa 1870. 34 cm (13.5 in.) x 16.5 cm (6.5 in.). ©Canadian Museum of Civilization/CMC VI-Z-61. Photograph by Harry Foster.

This small, beautifully made bag is unusual in that it is netted from sinew, rather than from caribou thong. It appears to have been new when collected: it shows no sign of use, and has no loops for the attachment of a carrying strap, or for closing the bag.

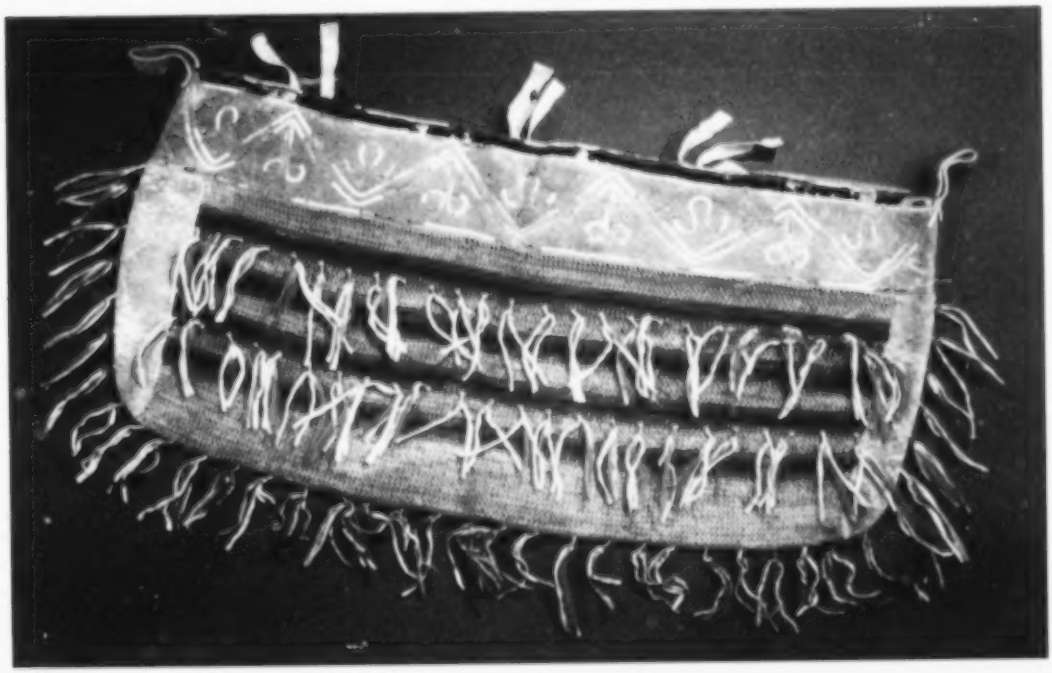

Figure 10

Netted Bag. Group unknown. Collected by Edward Harris, circa 1870. 59.5 cm (23.5 in.) x 29 cm (11.5 in.). ©Canadian Museum of Civilization/CMC VI-Z-62.

through them would thus be used to close the bag. Other bags were closed by short hide ties attached on opposite sides of the top.

Depending on the size of the bag and its intended function, the carrving strap might be a simple thong or a strong, broad band of tanned hide. Usually, carrying straps were detachable, and a number of the older bags were collected without a carrying strap in place. The strap on the bag shown in Figure 11 probably is typical, in materials and dimensions, of those used on game bags. It is of particular interest because of the carved bone toggles that fasten it to the bag: this may have been a common method of attaching a strap; although, as far as is known, this is the only museum example with this feature.

Judging from the examples in museums, Dene women often put considerable skill and artistry into making a babiche bag attractive as well as functional. Traditional decorative materials included porcupine quills, animal hair dyed with plant and berry juices, and paints made from red ochre (ferrous oxide) and

Figure 11

Hunting Bag. Group unknown. Collected by Edward Harris, circa 1870. 56 cm (22 in.) x 29 cm (11.5 in.).
©Canadian Museum of Civilization/CMC VI-Z-64. Photograph by Harry Foster.

charcoal. Several different quillwork techniques were used. On the upper front, waved and horizontal line patterns were worked by folding a flattened quill back and forth over two parallel lines of sinew stitching (Figure 13). Sometimes, a raised effect was created by using a slightly different technique, in which the quills were worked over a narrow strip of hide (Figure 14). In addition, the top edges

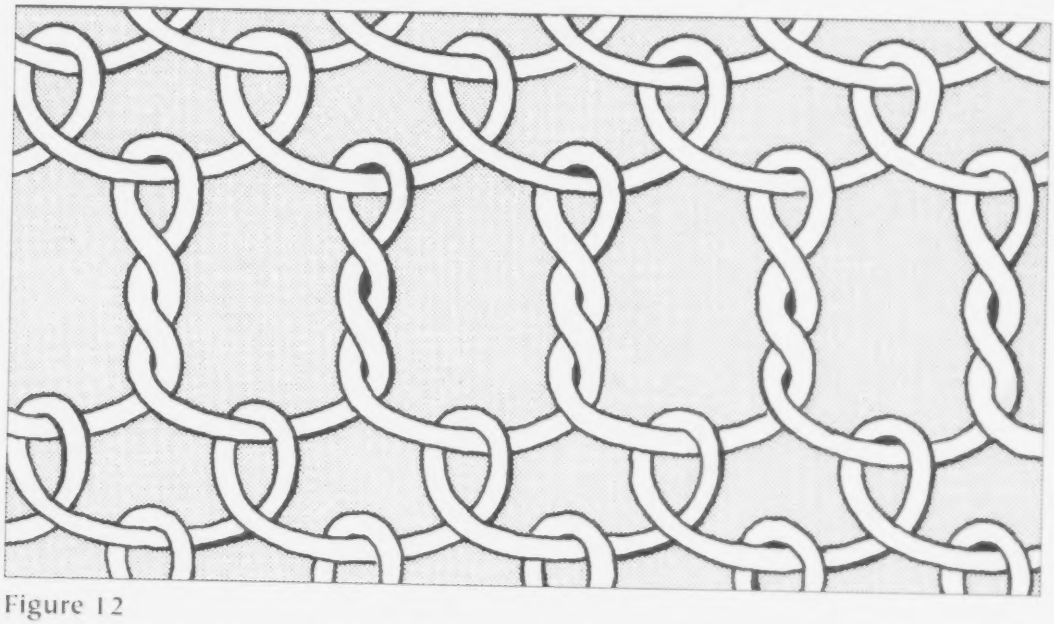

Figure 12

Looped netting with extra twist, which produces a decorative pattern of horizontal lines. Drawing by Dorothy K. Burnham.

Figure 13

Folded, sewn quillwork technique. The quill is held by two parallel rows of stitches in a sequence of over-under-over-under, which produces a zigzag effect. In this drawing and the one that follows, the technique is illustrated with a running stitch; today, Dene quillworkers use a tiny backstitch, taken through the surface of the hide immediately after each fold of the quill. Drawing by Dorothy K. Burnham.

of the bag often were finished with porcupine quillwork: a common technique used for such work is illustrated in Figure 15.

A standard feature in the netting on older babiche bags is a decorative pattern of three or four horizontal rows, created by using babiche which has been coloured red or black, and adding an extra twist to the looping, as seen in Figures 12 and 16. The source of the black colour has not been identified: possibly it was

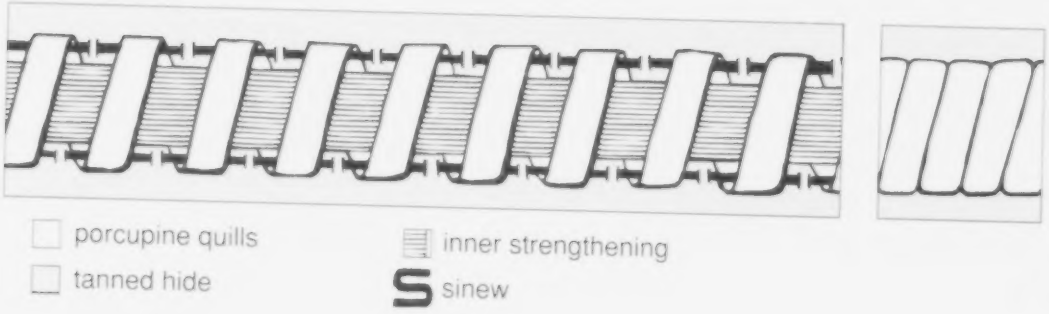

Figure 14

Reinforced, folded quillwork technique. In this type of sewn quillwork, the quills are folded back and forth over two parallel lines of sinew stitches in an over-over sequence. The work is reinforced, and slightly raised, by the insertion of a narrow strip of hide under the quills. Drawing by Dorothy K. Burnham.

Figure 15

Edging technique. A porcupine quill is passed through a slanting sinew stitch taken on the edge of the skin. It is then looped over a sinew or hide cord and back through the same edge stitch before moving to the next slanting stitch and repeating the movement. Drawing by Dorothy K. Burnham.

charcoal, rubbed into the thong. As Dora Nitsiza relates, both red ochre and the inner bark of birch trees were used to dye babiche red:

> *There are two places near Wha Ti that you can get that ochre . . . . I remember my grandmother used to get ochre to make the red colour. It is found just along the shore, even the rocks are just orange . . . . They got that ochre and put it in a little bowl. They just kept rubbing it on the babiche, pressing it in. It's all powdered already, it's ready to go . . .*
>
> *With the birch, you boil it; you boil it for a couple of hours and then you see all the colour, and then you take the bark out . . . when the water cools, you put your string in there and then it turns an orange colour.*[12]

Another element in the decoration of a babiche bag consisted of fine thong fringing, attached across the bottom, down the sides, and in two or more lines

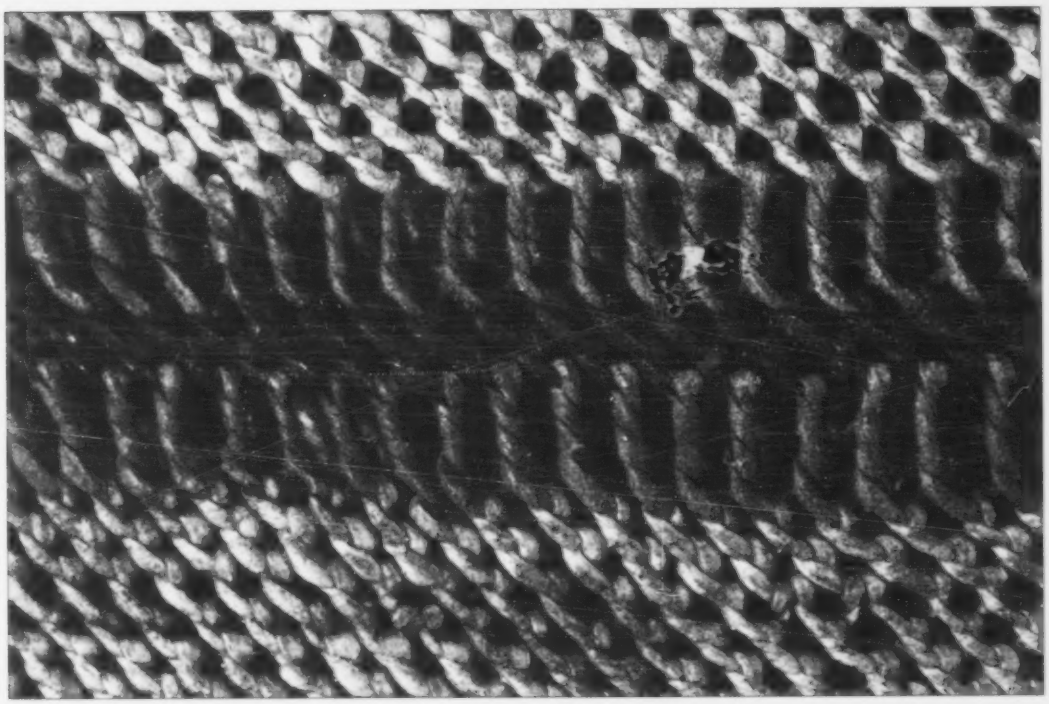

Figure 16

Detail, babiche bag netting, showing extra twist in the looping. ©Canadian Museum of Civilization/ CMC VI-Z-64. Photograph by Harry Foster.

across the front of the bag. Each fringe segment consisted of a thong drawn through the netting to form two equal strands that were wrapped together at the base with a single porcupine quill. This quill-wrapping technique is illustrated in Figure 17.

The bag illustrated in Figure 1 is decorated solely with indigenous materials. It is unusual in this respect: most of the bags preserved in museum collections — even those dating to the third quarter of the nineteenth century — have trade goods incorporated into their decoration. A small amount of trade cloth sometimes is used to bind the top edge or to work a pattern of zigzag and straight lines across the upper front. Silk embroidery thread, ravelled cloth, or tassels made of wool yarn, often are tied into the thong "tags" that decorate the front of the bag, and glass beads are threaded onto the tags or used to outline cloth appliqués on the upper front.

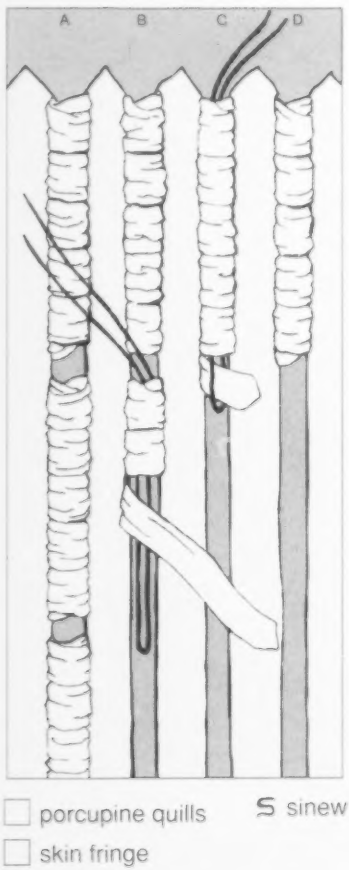

Figure 17

Technique used in wrapping hide fringes with porcupine quills. The same technique was used to decorate the paired thong tags attached in rows across the fronts, bottom edges and sides of babiche bags. Drawing by Dorothy K. Burnham.

across the front of the bag. Each fringe segment consisted of a thong drawn through the netting to form two equal strands that were wrapped together at the base with a single porcupine quill. This quill-wrapping technique is illustrated in Figure 17.

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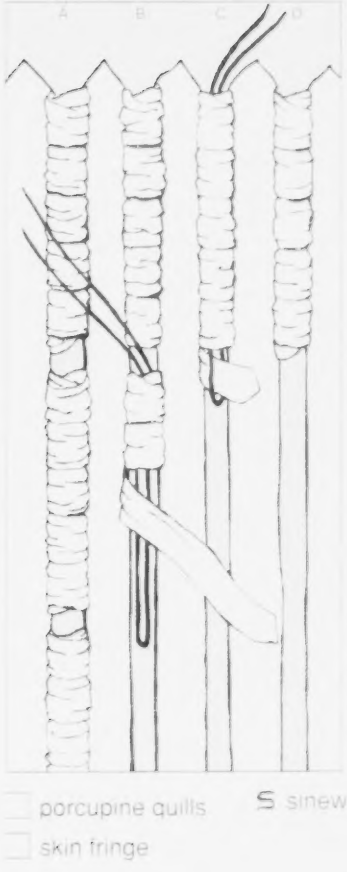

Figure 17

Technique used in wrapping hide fringes with porcupine quills. The same technique was used to decorate the paired thong tags attached in rows across the fronts, bottom edges and sides of babiche bags. Drawing by Dorothy K. Burnham.

Trade goods — beads, cloth, wool yarn, ribbons and braids — were prestigious to own and to display. For Dene women artists and artisans, they represented exciting new media as well. The small, exquisitely decorated bag seen in Figure 9 exemplifies the skill and care Dene seamstresses employed in working with imported materials. This bag also illustrates how traditional approaches to decoration of the babiche bag were maintained, even though new materials were being used.

Museum collections of Dene babiche bags span a period of about 80 years. The earliest dated examples, described above, were collected in the third quarter of the nineteenth century. With a few exceptions (mainly purchases of bags produced during traditional crafts projects or for sale at craft shops), collecting of babiche bags stopped during the late 1930s.[13] This date also coincides with

Figure 18

Game Bag, Dogrib. Collected by Charles A. Keefer, 1936–1937. 53 cm (21 in.) x 34 cm (13.5 in.). ©Canadian Museum of Civilization/CMC VI-E-54. Photograph by Harry Foster.

The collector of this bag, Charles Keefer, was employed as a clerk by the Hudson's Bay Company, and was stationed in the Dogrib community of Fort Rae between June 1936 and August 1937. With the outbreak of the Second World War, he joined the Navy, and was killed in August 1941. His mother presented his collection of Dogrib artifacts to the Canadian Museum of Civilization, as a memorial to her son.

elders' memories of when the bags ceased to be in general use within Dene communities. For example, Dogrib elder Mary Madeline Nitsiza estimated that at the time of the first workshop in Wha Ti in 1998, babiche bags had not been made by her people for at least 60 years.[14]

Judging from the museum collections, the basic form of the bag and the materials and techniques used in its construction changed little over time. Traditional approaches to decoration persisted as well: the Dogrib bag shown in Figure 18, collected at Fort Rae in

Figure 19

Bag, Sahtu Dene. Collected by Cornelius Osgood, Great Bear Lake, 1928–1929. 26 cm (10.25 in.) x 21 cm (8.25 in.). ©Canadian Museum of Civilization/CMC VI-G-25. Photograph by Harry Foster.

1936–1937, has a simple waved line worked in porcupine quills across the upper front — similar to the decoration typical on examples collected around 1860. It will be noted, however, that the tassels of wool yarn attached across the face of the bag — as well as those on a bag collected a decade earlier from Sahtu Dene (Figure 19) — are denser and more colourful than those on earlier examples. This heavy fringing with wool yarn in a mixture of bright shades is a common feature of early twentieth-century babiche bags, and probably reflects a greater availability of knitting yarns by this time.

While traditional techniques, materials and motifs endured, by the early twentieth century, new trends in decorative art — specifically, floral imagery and European

Figure 20

Game Bag, Chipewyan. Collected by H.A. Conroy, Fort Resolution, circa 1910. 67 cm (26 in.) x 30 cm (12 in.). ©Canadian Museum of Civilization/CMC VI-D-147. Photograph by Harry Foster.

The sides of this bag overlay the surface of the netted portion. Sides, top and fringe are all of smoked caribou hide, and probably were added to an older netted bag shortly before this example was collected. The back top of the bag is made from the soft, furred pelt of a small mammal, possibly ground squirrel.

needlework techniques such as embroidery and beadwork — were becoming very popular among the Dene. The decoration of some babiche bags collected at this time reflects these new developments (Figure 20). On these bags, elaborate floral motifs are worked, in silk embroidery thread or glass beads, across the top band, instead of the more traditional, linear, patterns.

Figure 21

Chipewyan hunter with babiche bag, Fort Resolution, 1913. Photograph by J. Alden Mason.
©Canadian Museum of Civilization/CMC 26117.

Section II

Revival of the Tradition

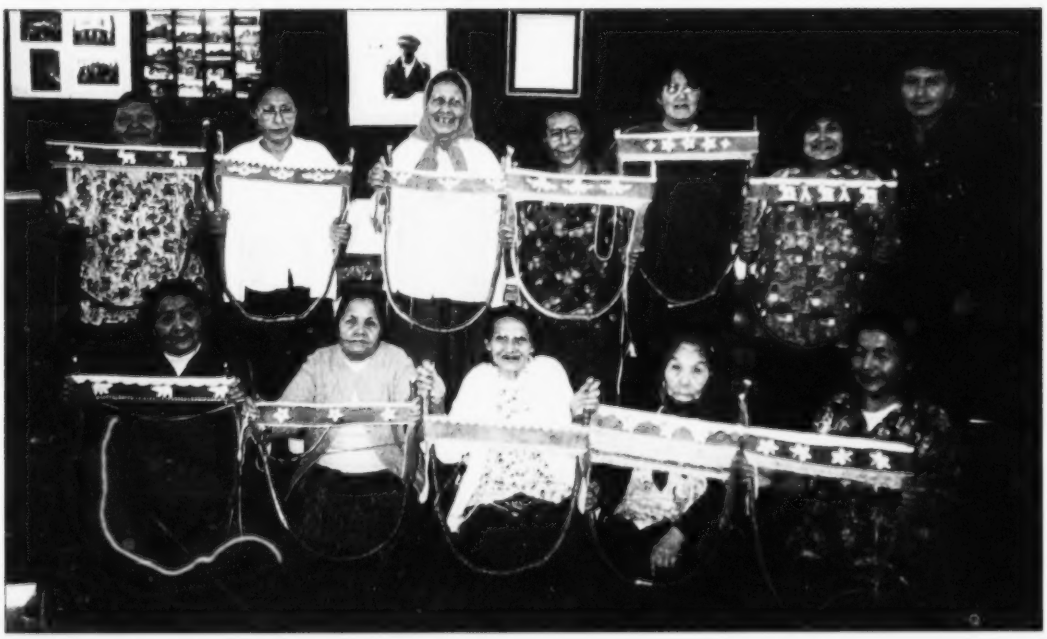

Figure 22

Participants at the first babiche bag workshop, held in Wha Ti, November 23–27, 1998. Left to right, back row: Madeline Champlain, Liza Jeremickca, Mary Adele Beaverho, Dora Alexis, Louisa Beaverho, Georgina Simpson, Albert Nitsiza. Front row: Mary Adele Simpson, Liza Nitsiza, Elizabeth Mantla, Marie Madeline Nitsiza, Rosa Romie. Photograph by Suzan Marie.

The first workshop to revive the skills involved in making a babiche bag was held from November 23 to 27, 1998 in Wha Ti, a small Dogrib community situated to the northwest of Great Slave Lake, 263 kilometres (164 miles) by air from Yellowknife. Wha Ti was an appropriate place to start such a project. Babiche bags are more closely identified with the Dogrib than with any other Dene group: a majority of museum examples are attributed to the Dogrib, and the tradition seems to have survived longer among them than it did in other communities. For example, Dogrib elder Dora Nitsiza remembers that her grandmother still used a babiche bag during the early 1950s, and one or two Dogrib women were making babiche bags for sale as recently as the 1980s.[13] Although by the end of the twentieth century, Dogrib in Wha Ti were no longer

Figure 23

Mary Madeline Nitsiza, Dogrib elder, photographed at the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre, Yellowknife, 1999. Photograph courtesy of BushTea Resources.

Mary Madeline Nitsiza was born in 1913, in a bush camp near the Grandin River. She grew up on the land. Her father taught her to hunt and fish; her mother taught her how to dry meat and fish, tan hides and make clothing. She married Pierre Nitsiza when she was fifteen years old, and they had eleven children. Mrs. Nitsiza has lived in Wha Ti for many years.

making babiche bags, there still were elders who knew how, and who were willing to teach others. Furthermore, the materials required to make a bag could be obtained in Wha Ti: people still hunted caribou and moose and tanned the hides; and they knew how to cut babiche from a caribou hide. Equally important, the band leadership of Wha Ti was interested in, and supportive of, the project, and provided assistance with translation and funding for instructors and materials.

Sixteen women participated in the first workshop (Figure 22). Two elders — Mary Madeline Nitsiza, aged 84, (Figure 23) and Elizabeth Mantla, aged 74 — instructed, with Albert Nitsiza (Figure 24) providing translation from Dogrib to English, as required. The bags were made with tops, sides and carrying straps of

Figure 24
Dogrib elder Dora Nitsiza with babiche bag she made recently, and Albert Nitsiza, Sub-Chief, Wha Ti First Nation, at the Canadian Museum of Civilization, June 2003. Photograph by Harry Foster.

I am 63 years old . . . . I remember when I was six years old I saw babiche bags, but I never was taught how to make them. But when Suzan came to Wha Ti, I heard that somebody was teaching babiche bags and I came to the workshop for a couple of hours . . . now I know how.
(Dora Nitsiza, personal communication, June 2003)

smoked moose hide. Thong cut from tanned, unsmoked (white) caribou hide was used for the netting.

These "first workshop" bags differed somewhat in their decoration from the nineteenth-century examples. As noted above, porcupine quillwork was a common element in the decoration of a traditional Dene babiche bag. In past centuries, a woman began learning quillwork techniques as a young girl, and she spent many hours as an adult perfecting her art. The Wha Ti workshop highlighted the fact that this skill, too, was in danger of becoming a lost tradition. Dogrib

Figure 25

Mary Adele Beaverho, Wha Ti, November 1998. The length of tanned smoked moose hide which will form the top of the bag has been sewn and decorated with edging and appliqués of white (unsmoked) caribou hide, then slipped over the bent wooden frame. Mrs. Beaverho is about to start the netting. Photograph by Suzan Marie.

women once had excelled at quillwork, but in 1998, no one in Wha Ti worked with quills, and there was no one who could teach the technique. Participants in the workshop decorated their bags with animal or flower motifs, cut out of white, tanned caribou hide and appliquéd to the band forming the top of the bag (Figure 25). The same white hide was used to bind the opening edges, and to make tassels which were attached down the sides and across the face of the bag. When Suzan Marie pointed out that this type of decoration was not true to the Dene tradition, and referred participants to illustrations of museum examples, a number of the women removed the hide appliqués and replaced them with more traditional, linear, patterns, which they worked in glass beads.

Knowledge of quillwork technique was fading or lost in other Dene communities as well, so it was decided that the next workshop should focus on this skill. A workshop on the art of sewing with porcupine quills, again organized by Suzan Marie through the Dene Cultural Institute, was held in Fort Simpson from February 14 to 21, 1999. It drew over twenty women, ranging in age from 12 years old to almost 80. They came from ten small communities in the "Deh Cho" or Mackenzie River region. Three Deh Cho elders — Caroline Bonnetrouge from Fort Providence, Sarah Hardisty from Jean Marie River, and Jane Grossetete from Fort Simpson — provided instruction (Figures 26, 27 and 28). Mrs. Bonnetrouge also taught the group how to prepare quills for decorative work: how to "pluck" the quills from a porcupine carcass, how to clean and sort them by size, and how to colour them through immersion in a bath of commercial fabric dye.

At the request of the Wha Ti band council, a second workshop was held there in May 2000. This time, porcupine quillwork was added to the workshop agenda, and Caroline Bonnetrouge came from Fort Providence to teach this skill. During the next two years, other babiche bag workshops were held: in Fort Providence in June 2000 (Figures 29, 30 and 31) and Fort Good Hope in July 2000 (Figures 32 and 33), with Suzan Marie demonstrating the technique. At the Fort Good Hope workshop, Lucy Ann Yakeleya (Figure 34), who had learned porcupine quillwork

Figure 26

Carolyn Bonnetrouge, Slavey elder, Fort Providence, 2000. Photograph by Suzan Marie.

Figure 27

Sarah Hardisty, Slavey elder, Jean Marie River, 2001. Photograph by Suzan Marie.

Sarah Hardisty was born in 1925 in the tiny Mackenzie Valley community of Jean Marie River, and she has lived there all her life. She is renowned throughout the Northwest Territories, and beyond, for her traditional craft skills, particularly hide-tanning and porcupine quillwork.

When I was nine years old I made my first pair of moccasins . . . . I made them for myself and I remember being very glad. We were living in the bush and my older sister always sewed, and I would sew beside her. That's how I made for myself the very first moccasins I ever made. When I was twelve I prepared a moose hide for the first time. It was a calf hide and it turned out very good and I was very proud of it.

(Sarah Hardisty — interviewed by her daughter Marilyn Hardisty, February 1994. English translation by Andy Norwegian.)

at the Fort Simpson workshop and quickly excelled at it, now found herself in the role of instructor:

> *I enjoyed teaching . . . quillwork is not that easy to catch onto . . . sometimes your fingers and hands feel so awkward at first, but in the end I think a lot of them did start to catch on . . . and I really enjoyed teaching . . . . When we first started I never thought the end result was going to look so fabulous . . . . It was really amazing to see how they just took off with it and used their own creativity in designing the bags . . . . It made me feel good to know that I was a part of that.*[16]

For the participants and the community as a whole, the workshop experiences produced rewards beyond the revival of specific traditional skills. As community members of all ages and both sexes (the majority were women) gathered, cultural information was exchanged and younger people had an opportunity to learn

Figure 28

Jane Grossetete instructing Mary Nayally at the Fort Simpson workshop, February 1999. Jane Grossetete was born on November 2, 1930 at Rabbit Skin River on the Mackenzie River. Photograph by Suzan Marie.

My grandparents brought me up, since I was eight months old. I remember travelling two years with my grandparents up the Liard River, then on foot to Trout Lake. We lived there for one year, living off the land, living in tents or houses made of logs . . . . In the same year . . . in the spring, we went to Fort Liard, walking, packing all our belongings and the dogs had backpacks too . . .

My grandmother taught me to tan moose hide and to make snowshoes. My mother taught me to do fancy work with quills and silk, at age 10 or 12. She showed me how to make moccasins, mittens, slippers. I did all the hand and foot wear for my grandparents after they got too old. I also did trapping and hunting all by myself as they had no sons. (Jane Grossetete — interviewed by Louisa Moreau, summer 1991.)

Figure 29

Some of the participants at the Fort Providence babiche bag workshop, June 2000. Back row, left to right: Nancy Bonnetrouge, Michele Landry, Bertha Minoza, Rita Squirrel, Sylvia Nadli, Betty Ann Bonnetrouge, Maceline Lesage, Jessica Field. Second row, left to right: Nellie Norwegian, Suzan Marie, Ruby Ann Nadli, Flora Lefoin, Marie Bonnetrouge, Emily Squirrel, Rose Mary Nadli, Lucy Squirrel, Caroline Bonnetrouge, Madeline Canadien. Kneeling, front: Julie Elleze, Maxine Lacorne, Karalyn Bonnetrouge. Photograph courtesy of BushTea Resources.

Figure 30

Sylvia Nadli, Fort Providence, June 2000, with babiche bag she made at the workshop.
Photograph by Suzan Marie.

I was born in Fort Simpson, but raised in Fort Providence. I have been doing traditional art work as long as I can remember. I make mukluks, mitts; I even made a leather jacket . . . I was taught by my mum, Cecile Nadli, and I also learned just by watching other women . . . . Now that I have learned how to make that bag, I know I have learned from long ago . . . . I really enjoyed making that babiche bag, and it also was my first time doing quillwork. It was great.
(Sylvia Nadli — personal communication, September 2003.)

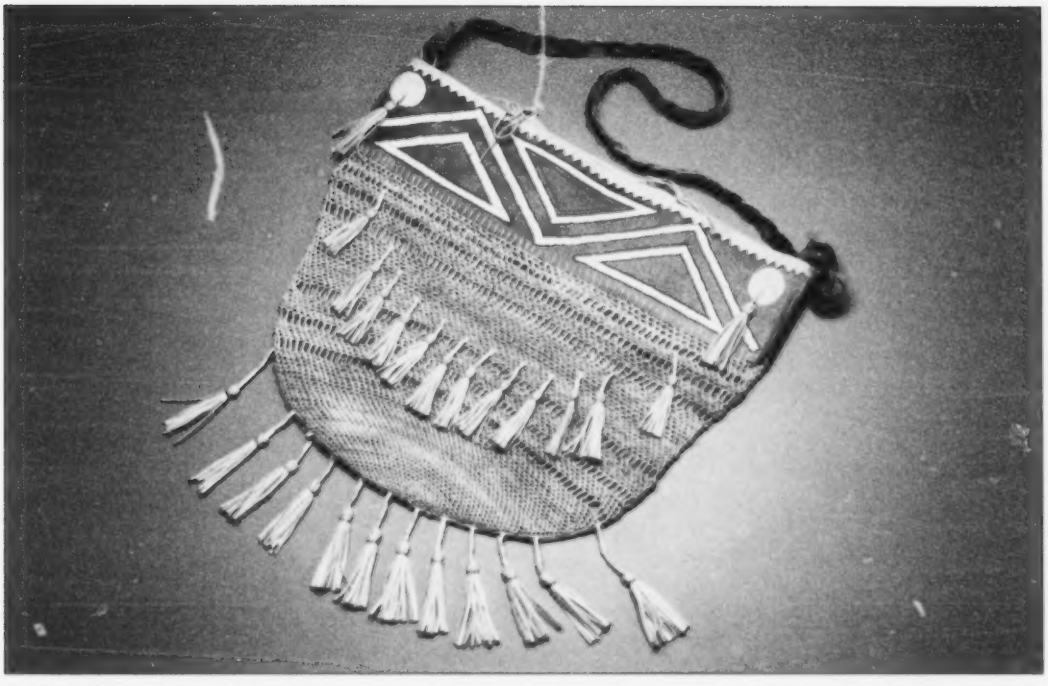

Figure 31

Babiche bag made by Sylvia Nadli, 2000. The bag is made from white (unsmoked) caribou hide, with top of smoked caribou hide. Decoration of the upper is with porcupine quills, in folded sewn technique. Photograph by Harry Foster.

Figure 32

Some of the participants at the Fort Good Hope workshop, July 2000. Left to right: Janet Grandjambe, Judy Lafferty, Denise Manuel, Rose Mary Lennie, quillwork instructor Lucy Ann Yakeleya (back to camera). Photograph by Suzan Marie.

from elders. Witnessing the work in hand, and seeing photographs of babiche bags from an earlier time, often stimulated elders' memories and elicited information that might otherwise have gone unheard. Lucy Ann Yakeleya described one such special moment:

> *Mrs. Georgina Tobac just stopped in one day as we were working. It was a really casual atmosphere as we were working; everybody just sat around in one room. It was like one big visit, it was really enjoyable.*

Figure 33
Jeannie Shae, Fort Good Hope, with babiche bag decorated with porcupine quillwork she made during the workshop, July 2000. Photograph by Suzan Marie.

There were people from the community that were curious to see what we were doing and they would stop by every now and then and just visit and sit with us. Anyway, Georgina stopped by that one day and she was telling us about the traditional word for that bag and we were telling her what we were doing. She said the bag was called "dahtl'Q" and it was used to carry game, just like a packsack a long time ago. And we hadn't known the traditional word for that bag that we were making because no one had them any more, so it was really interesting to learn that. [17]

Figure 34

Lucy Ann Yakeleya with bag she made in 2002. Lucy Ann Yakeleya is a Sahtu Dene linguist and craftsperson. She was born in Fort Good Hope and now lives in Yellowknife. Photograph by Harry Foster.

In 1999 I went to Fort Simpson to take part in a workshop on porcupine quillwork . . . . There were three elderly ladies [Jane Grossetete, Caroline Bonnetrouge and Sarah Hardisty] *that were teaching . . . . I had tried to learn before by teaching myself, by looking at books, and it just never looked the way that I wanted it to. But when we went to the workshop and learned from these ladies, I was so fascinated and so interested in learning, and right from the beginning I think I just caught on to it and I really enjoyed it.*
(Lucy Ann Yakelaya — interview with Suzan Marie, June 2003)

Section III

Making a Babiche Bag

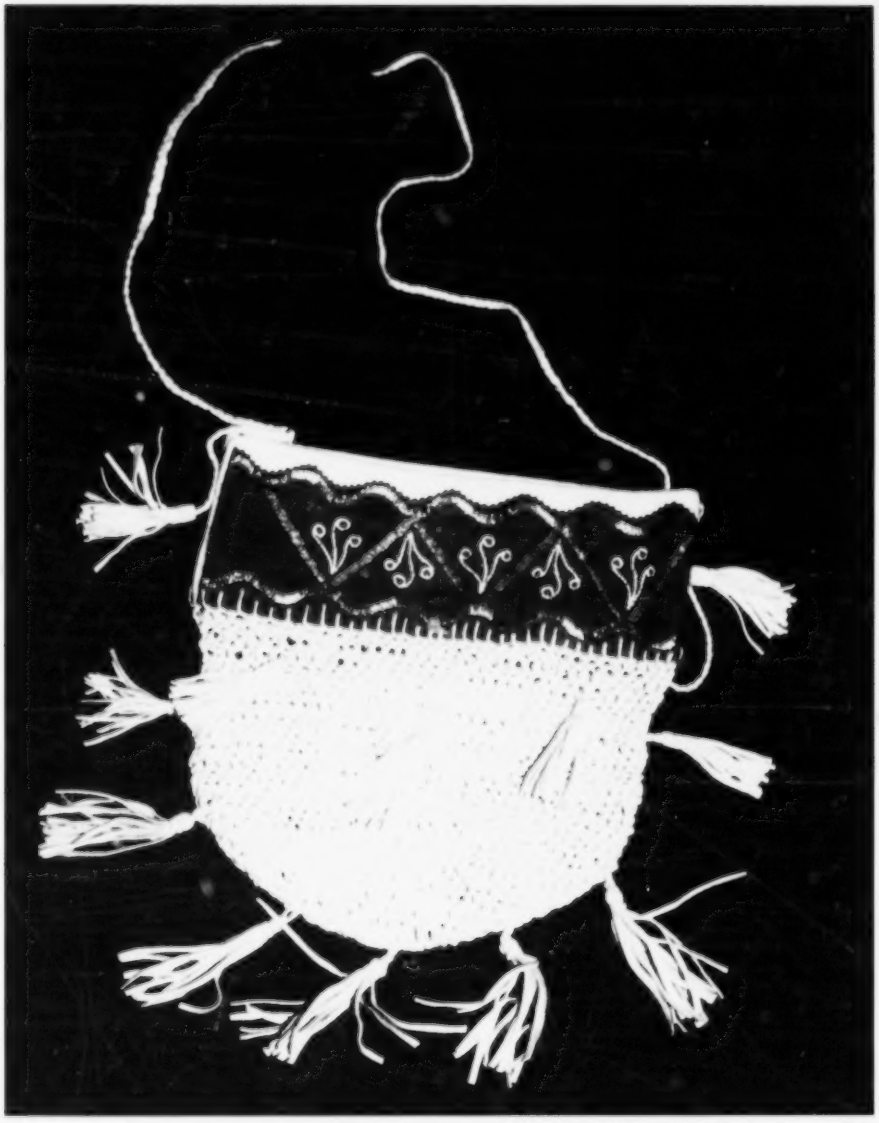

Figure 35

Bag made by Judy Lafferty at the Fort Good Hope workshop, July 2000. Judy Lafferty is a skilled seamstress and hide-tanner, well known for her beautiful beadwork and embroidery. She learned how to do porcupine quillwork at the Fort Simpson workshop. Photograph by Judy Thompson.

In this section, we describe the basic stages in the construction of a babiche bag: preparation of babiche, making a frame to hold the work, starting the bag and netting technique.

Preparation of Babiche

True babiche is thong cut from a "raw" hide — that is, one that has been washed and scraped clean of hair and flesh but not tanned. Thong cut from a "tanned" hide — that is, a hide which has undergone more extensive preparation, involving repeated washings, scrapings, soakings in water mixed with animal brains, and smoking to colour one side a rich amber shade — often is used as well to make babiche bags. Netted bags also may be made from sinew (a moose or caribou back tendon that has been scraped clean, dried, and split into fine strands which are twisted together), but this is much less common.

Figure 36

Dora Nitsiza and Bernice Beaverho demonstrating how to cut babiche, at the Canadian Museum of Civilization, June 2003. Normally, babiche would be cut from a halved caribou hide, with the goal being to produce a long, continuous, thong. As a whole or half caribou hide was not available when the photograph was taken, Dora and Bernice demonstrated the technique with a small piece of tanned hide. Photograph by Harry Foster.

The method of cutting thong is similar, whether a raw or tanned hide is used. A knife works best for cutting rawhide; a tanned hide is easily cut with scissors. Usually, two women work together, holding a damp, halved, caribou hide stretched tightly between them (Figure 36). One woman does the cutting; the other woman gradually turns the hide. The goal is a long, continuous line of even width, approximately .5 cm (.25 in.) wide, or even finer. Sometimes, the cutting starts on the outer edge of the hide and ends in the centre; alternately, a cut may be made in the centre and the cutting done spirally from the centre out. The length of hide is then stretched. One caribou hide usually provides enough babiche or thong to make a bag approximately 45 cm (18 in.) by 25 cm (10 in.) in size.

Making a Frame

A frame holds the band that forms the top of the bag taut, and allows the worker to control the shape and width of the bag as the looping progresses. The frame

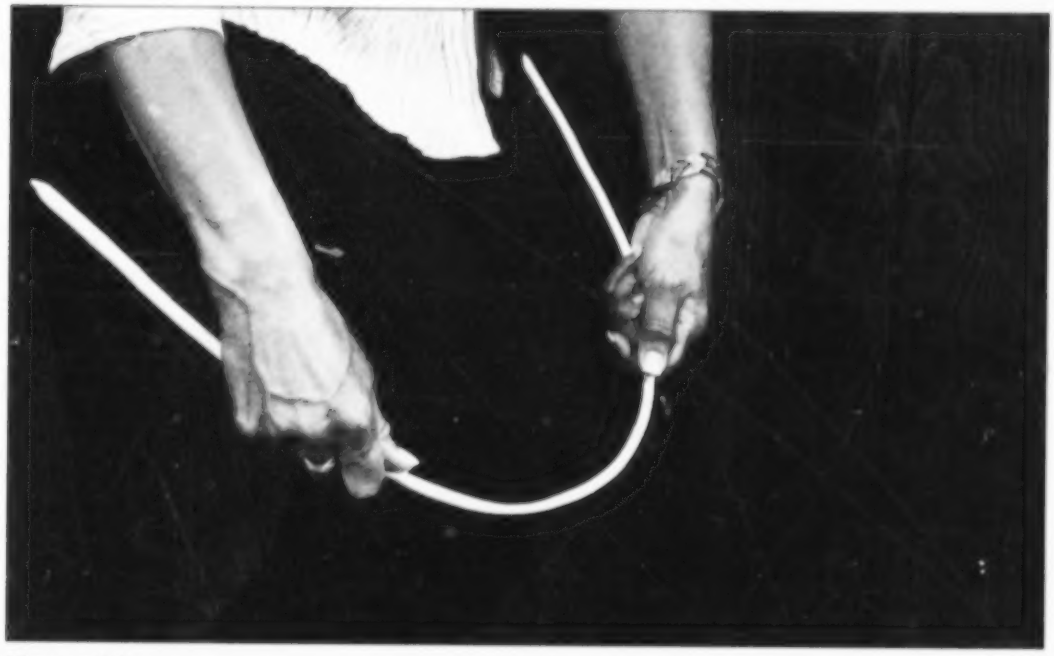

Figure 37

Shaping the frame. The length of the stick, and width of the frame once the stick is bent, will vary according to the intended size of the bag. Demonstrated by Suzan Marie at the Canadian Museum of Civilization, September 2003. Photograph by Harry Foster.

is made from a branch about 2.5 cm (1 in.) in diameter, cut from a living tree. Red willow or poplar often are used. While still fresh and pliable, the branch is peeled and smoothed, then bent to a deep U-shape by gently working it over the knee, starting at one end, rather than in the middle (Figure 37).

Starting the Bag

The upper section, or top, of the bag is made from a length of tanned moose or caribou hide. The width of this piece may vary, but is usually about one-quarter of the finished bag's total depth. If the bag is to have sides, narrower lengths of tanned hide also will be required.

Before the top is sewn, decorative work is usually applied to the band, on the segment that will form the front of the bag. On older bags, the most usual form of

Figure 38
Quillwork line technique: wrapped running stitch. The porcupine quill passes over and under a line of sinew (or other thread) running stitches. For clarity, in the diagram, the work is shown spread out. An actual quilled line, as shown in Figure 39, has a very compact appearance and the stitching is not visible. Drawing by Dorothy K. Burnham.

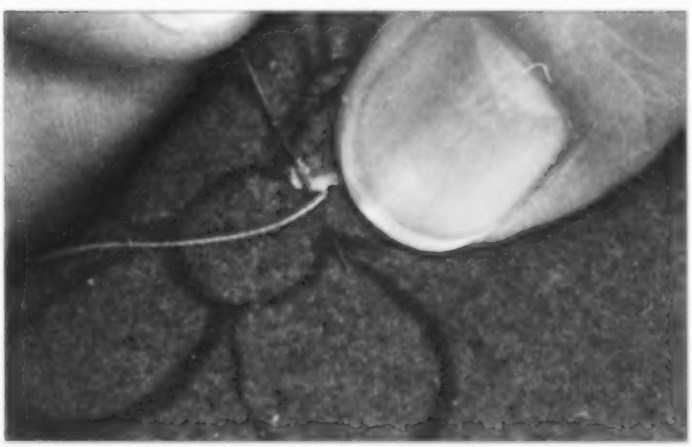

Figure 39
Quillwork line technique: wrapped running stitch. Demonstrated by Lucy Ann Yakeleya at the Canadian Museum of Civilization, June 2003. Photograph by Harry Foster.

decoration is a pattern of straight and waved or zigzag lines worked in porcupine quills. Two common techniques are illustrated in Figures 13 and 14. Some modern quillworkers produce decorative work similar to that seen on older bags — see, for example, the bags produced at the Fort Providence workshop, shown in Figures 29, 30 and 31. Others use slightly different quillwork techniques to create curvilinear and floral motifs, as seen in Figures 34, 35 and 39. Some contemporary artisans use other media — glass beads or moose hair, for example — to work floral or geometric motifs on babiche bags.

Once the decorative work is completed, the ends of the band are sewn together. If the bag is to have hide sides, they are sewn to the top at this time. The top band is then slipped over the frame, and the netting can commence.

Netting Technique

The netting is done in a simple looping technique. The first row is secured through the lower edge of the top band (Figure 40). In earlier times, a bone awl was used to make holes in the hide, and the babiche pushed through with the fingers. Some women still work this way today. Others thread the babiche onto a darning needle and use this to draw it through the top band, and also to do the looping. If a finer material — sinew, for example — is used for the netting, a glover's needle works well.

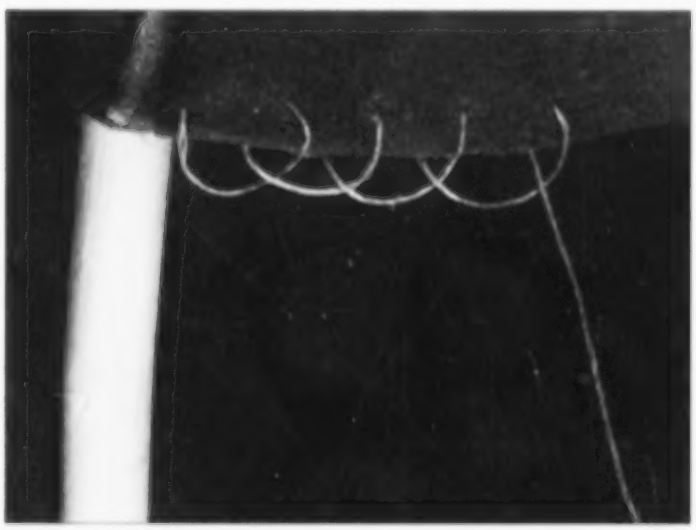

Figure 40
Start of netting. In this instance, sinew (rather than thong) is used, threaded on a glover's needle. Demonstrated by Suzan Marie at the Canadian Museum of Civilization, September 2003. Photograph by Harry Foster.

If the bag has hide sides, the looping is worked back and forth between them, drawn through the hide at each turn (Figure 41). Otherwise, the looping is worked continuously, around and around. As noted in Section I, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century bags very often have a decorative effect of horizontal lines introduced into the netting, achieved by using thong coloured black or red, and adding an extra twist to the looping (Figure 16).

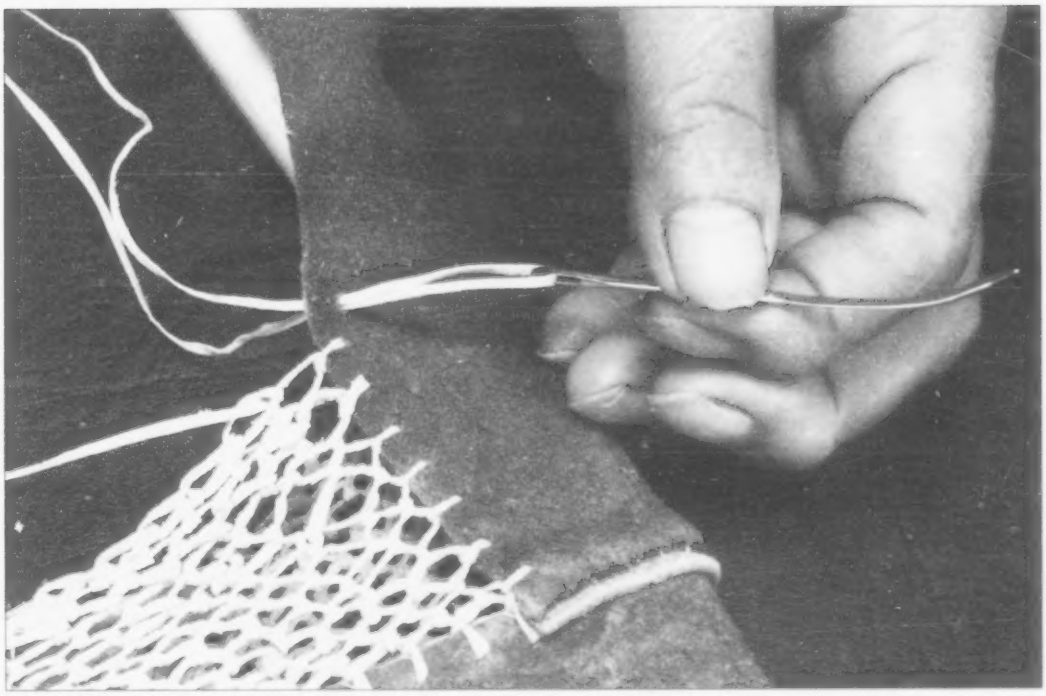

Figure 41

Securing looping at side of bag. Demonstrated by Dora Nitsiza at the Canadian Museum of Civilization, June 2003. Photograph by Harry Foster.

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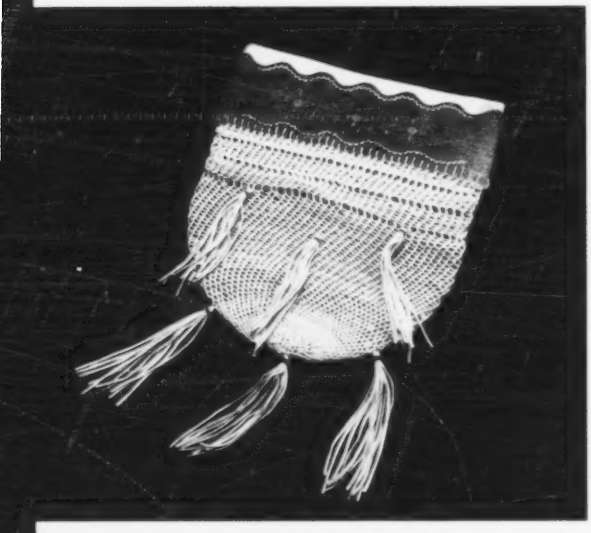
Endnotes

1. The Dene of the Northwest Territories are part of a much larger linguistic/cultural family. Northern Athabaskan-speaking peoples also live in British Columbia, the Yukon, Alaska, and the northern parts of Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba.
2. Mrs. Georgina Tobac of Fort Good Hope recalled the word. Translation to English by Lucy Ann Yakeleya (personal communication, September 2003).
3. *Dictionnaire Historique du Français Québécois*. Les Presses de l'Université Laval. Sainte-Foy, 1998.
4. For a discussion of the history of Dene spruce root basketry and its recent revival, see Marie, Suzan and Judy Thompson, *Dene Spruce Root Basketry: Revival of a Tradition*. Canadian Museum of Civilization, 2002.
5. Petitot, Emile. *The Book of Dene*. Yellowknife: Department of Education, 1976:73.
6. Ethnographers whose writings contain references to Dene babiche bags include Russell, Frank, *Explorations in the Far North: Being the Report of an Expedition Under the Auspices of the University of Iowa During the Years 1892, '93 and '94*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1898; and Osgood, Cornelius, *The Ethnography of the Great Bear Lake Indians*. Annual Report for 1931, 31-97. National Museum of Canada Bulletin 70. Ottawa, 1932.
7. Dora Nitsiza, personal communication, June 2003.
8. Dora Nitsiza, personal communication, June 2003.
9. Dora Nitsiza, personal communication, June 2003.
10. Albert Nitsiza, personal communication, June 2003.
11. 480.3; 481.8; 558.45; 558.45A; 558.47; 559.22; 848.20; 848.21. Another bag in this collection, 1951.387, said to be from the "Fraser River area" is almost certainly of Dene origin as well. For a catalogue of the NMS collection, see Idiens, Dale, *A Catalogue of Northern Athapaskan Indian artifacts in the Collection of the Royal Scottish Museum, Edinburgh*. Royal Scottish Museum, 1979.
12. Dora Nitsiza, personal communication, June 2003.
13. The Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre has several bags made by Dogrib and Slavey women in the late 1970s and early 1980s, as part of traditional crafts projects, or for sale at craft shops.
14. Interviewed by Albert Nitsiza, August 2003.
15. See Note 12 above; also Hale, Barbara and Kate Duncan, *Out of the North: The Subarctic Collections of the Haffenreffer Museum of Anthropology*, Haffenreffer Museum of Anthropology 1989:278.
16. Interview with Suzan Marie, June 2003.
17. Interview with Suzan Marie, June 2003.

WHADǪǪ TEHMĮ
LONG-AGO PEOPLE'S PACKSACK

Dene Babiche Bags: Tradition and Revival

In earlier times, net bags made from caribou thong — today known as "babiche bags" — were commonplace items in Dene homes. Although intended for practical use, these bags were often beautifully decorated with porcupine quillwork, fringes and coloured patterns in the netting.



Babiche bags were used by the Dene until the early twentieth century. Gradually, however, as imported substitutes became available, the Dene ceased to make their netted thong bags. In 1998, Suzan Marie initiated a project to revive this craft. Assisted by elder-instructors, she held workshops in several small Dene communities. The Canadian Museum of Civilization participated by supplying research information and photographs of museum examples. Today, babiche bags are being made again by Dene artisans.

This book describes the role babiche bags played in Dene lives during an earlier time and traces the modern revival of the craft. It is richly illustrated with photographs of babiche bags, both old and new. Also included are descriptions and illustrations of the techniques involved in making a babiche bag. This will be a resource to all who are interested in Dene culture and heritage. It will also serve as a practical guide to artisans wishing to make their own Dene babiche bag.

About the Authors

Suzan Marie, a Chipewyan Dene, is the owner of BushTea Resources, a company based in Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, which specializes in providing training in the manufacture of Dene and Métis fine arts.

Judy Thompson is Curator of Western Subarctic Ethnology at the Canadian Museum of Civilization. She is the author of several publications on the clothing and artistic traditions of Northern Athabaskan peoples.

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